George's PINK PAGES May 1999

Colony Management during May Nectar Flow

Take that long awaited trip to the Caribbean Islands of Jamaica and Nassau before the temperature gets too hot and before the kids get out of school. You can leave tomorrow if you had started planning your 1999 "honey bee plans" last fall by requeening with a young queen, treated your colonies with Apistan for the 8 weeks of October and November thereby killing about 99% of all Varroa mites, began 1:1 sugar syrup feeding in February to initiate egg laying by your queen, start brood chamber reversal in February and faithfully continued it until now, installed a queen excluder and one super of drawn comb by about April 1st and added another 4 supers of drawn comb before May 1st, attended the Maryland STATE bee meetings and the monthly instructional meetings of the MCBA, and lastly, helped all those beginning beekeepers that need your help so badly and provided talks to our local school students about the importance of honey bee pollination to the food for humans.

I am ready to go to the Caribbean right now, but maybe my electric (wheelchair) scooter would not do very well in the salt water and sand. You tell me what I missed when you return.

For those other people whose responsibilities of life prevented you from performing all my fall and winter suggestions for making a fine spring honey crop, let me see if I can help, prevent a disaster, and renew your enthusiasm. SWARM PREVENTION may be of great concern. It is extremely late in the Maryland area to practice swarm control in place of a MAJOR IMMEDIATE action of swarm prevention. Quickly inspect your brood chambers, and if swarm cells with visible royal jelly and larvae are present, the bees have already entered the swarm "mode" perhaps 10 days ago, and you have NO choice but SPLIT THAT COLONY instantly or you are about to lose a swarm. Maybe you don't want another colony or you don't have the equipment for another colony; but you don't want to lose that honey crop either. There is no problem here, the honey bee supply houses have plenty of equipment for sale, you can sell the honey crop to pay for the equipment, and recombine the two colonies after July 4th into just one colony WITH THE NEW YOUNG QUEEN. Further, most beekeepers are short of DRAWN COMB; and this new "temporary" colony has drawn maybe 20-30 sheets of foundation into DRAWN COMB and all you have to do is protect it from wax moths until next spring.

HOW do you make this sudden split, get a new queen, and don't lose your honey crop? Find the OLD queen and transfer the frame she is on PLUS most (not all) of the frames that contain BROOD and all the adhering bees into a new hive body with a super of foundation on top of that, and set this new colony on a new stand and feed it 1:1 sugar syrup. The older foraging bees that you have transferred to this new colony will go out to forage but return to the old colony by "habit". The result is that your "new" colony consists of your old queen, the brood, and the non-foraging nurse bees who will feed the brood larva and draw foundation because of the sugar syrup feed and the incoming May nectar. You may even have to add an excluder and a super of foundation on this "new" colony in about 10 days. ALWAYS THINK AHEAD OF YOUR BEES! In the old parent colony, you can either have left a frame with a big swarm cell on it or telephone for a new MARKED queen with 48 hour delivery (my choice), you have all the foraging bees to make your honey crop, and you have replaced the brood frames with either empty drawn comb or foundation

(all together, not mixed with drawn frames). Neither of these colonies will swarm, because you have eliminated the causes of swarming during a nectar flow which are twofold: an older queen who cannot produce enough queen pheromone to "glue" a large bunch of bees into a single functioning unit, and you have given both units lots of super space and foundation for them to draw and store the thin nectar. The parent colony might make 3/4 of the honey yield that a non swarming colony might make and it has a NEW queen, while the new "temporary" colony might make 1-2 supers of honey and lots of drawn comb for use next year.

In spite of past practice, honey bee research has proven that destroying swarm cells will probably NOT stop swarming; but if the colony does swarm, your colony is left QUEENLESS because you destroyed the swarm cells and the old queen had stopped laying eggs in order to lose weight to fly with the swarm. In the past, many beekeepers clipped a queen's wings feeling that a "non-flying" queen prevented swarming; but research has shown that this practice might only delay a swarm 3-4 days, and the colony may kill the clipped queen and swarm with the first virgin queen that emerges.

I have written paper after paper that you CANNOT substitute foundation for drawn comb. If you do NOT have DRAWN COMB and have to use foundation, you HAVE to install a super of 10 frames (never 9) of foundation when the prior super is about 1/2 - 2/3 full. You will have a kingsize mess on your hands if you install more than one super of foundation at a time, but your bees might well go in to a swarming mode if your prior supers are filled up before adding an empty super I like to install a new super of 10 frames as soon as the bees have filled (not capped, just filled) the 6 center frames of the prior super, and I reposition those 6 frames by placing 3 filled frames on either side of 4 empty frames in the center before adding the new super. By doing this, all 10 frames of the prior super are filled and capping started before much filling is done on the new 10 frames above.

Over many years, I have listened to novices (not beginners) complain that their bees did not produce the crop that mine or some neighbor's bees yield; and they blame it on the race, a poor queen, El Nino, or a dozen other reasons. When I have gone to their apiary to inspect their bees or listen to the long stories about the amount of attention that they give their colonies during a nectar flow, quite often I find the answer to their problem. The beekeeper, anxious to help his bees make a large and beautiful honey crop, lights his smoker, opens the colony, checks almost every frame, even repositioning some, and repeats the procedure later that week and again next week, etc. Could you have your home ready for a party of 50 people once each week for 4-6 weeks and still perform your normal employment? Of course not, and neither can your bees! When you inspect your bees and use a smoker during a nectar flow, you have totally disrupted the normal bee activity for 24-48 hours while the bees repair the broken comb or cappings you broke, air out the smoke so they can smell queen pheromones again, regurgitate all the honey they gorged themselves with thinking they might have to fly to a new home from theirs that is apparently "burning", restart queen laying in freshly polished cells, and fix a dozen other things that curtailed nectar collecting to make honey!

All of you know my heavy use of that word: anthropomorphic. STOP being anthropomorphic and learn to "think like a bee". Bees know what they are doing, and it your job to LEARN from them and don't try and teach them a thing! Maybe a little removed from the subject, but so very, very important: Over 60 years ago, my mentor, Dr. James I Hambleton, Chief of the

Honey Bee Division of the U. S. Dept. of Agriculture, would say to me "Just inspect UNDER the queen excluder and if you have made everything correct for the bees down there, the bees will take care of everything above the excluder themselves without your help" What a superb instructor he was, and now 60+ years later I still keep bees with the science that I was taught then, later, and TODAY.

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